Chapter 6 - The Violin

Brief summary:

- Origin and description of the structure of the violin
- Some personalities who first played violin in Carnatic Music
- The basic principles of violin playing and its potential

The origin of the violin and the early violin makers

The violin emerged in its definitive form between 1520 and 1550 in northern Italy with Milan as its centre. The first violin makers in the area included, from Brescia, Giovan Giacomo Dalla Corna (1484-1530) and Zanetto de Michelis da Montechiaro (1488-1562). The instruments of these violin makers were not all violins that had reached the final phase of their evolution. Amongst the instruments that bear a date are two violins by Andrea Amati (1500? – 1576), built between 1542 and 1546, that had only three strings in their primitive form. But from 1555 several documents testify to the existence of the four-stringed violin: the first four-stringed violin by Amati that has come down to the present is dated precisely 1555.

The famous school of Cremona was established by Antonio Amati (1555-1640?), Girolamo Amati (1556-1630) and Girolamo’s son, Nicola (1596-1684). In Brescia the first great master was Gasparo di Bertolotti da Salò (1540-1590). Giovanni Paolo Maggini (1580-1632) was his most important pupil. The school of Brescia declined after Maggini, while Cremona retained its uncontested first place.

The pupils of Nicola Amati were Girolamo Amati II (1649-1740), Andrea Guarneri (1626-1698), G.B. Rogeri (1666-1696), Francesco Ruggieri (1645-1700), Paolo Grancino (1655-1692) and probably also ANTONIO STRADIVARI (1644-1737).
Giovanni Maria Dalla Corna founded perhaps the violin making school of Venice. Elsewhere violin making schools appeared early in France, in Paris around 1550, then in Mirecourt, Nancy and Lyon.

![Fig 6.2 A label found inside a violin made by Jacob Stainer](image)

Jacob Stainer (ca. 1621-1683, Absam, near Innsbruck in Austria) emerged as the first great violin maker north of the Alps. His renown at one point outshone even that of the school in Cremona! H.I. Biber, Jean-Sebastien Bach, F. Veracini, Locatelli, and Leopold Mozart played Stainer violins.

**The Indian pre-cursor to the violin**

The Ravanastron, the Rabab or Rebab (very ancient, it was played in Persia, in Arabia and in North Africa), the Rebec (the rubebe or rebel or rebec was brought to southern Europe in the Middle Ages by Muslim merchants and artists)... and many other more or less rudimentary instruments dating back to ancient times are considered to be interesting – although distant – precursors of the violin.

The Ramayana has the legend of the instrument, which is said to have belonged to a sovereign Ravana 5000 years before Christ.  

![Fig 6.3 An illustration of the Ravanastron](image)

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64 Ref: Violin Making, As it was and is. By Ed. Heron – Allen, Ward Lock & Co, London, page 38.
Brief description of the parts of the violin and the wood used.

The parts of the violin.

Scroll, peg box, pegs, neck and fingerboard  (Maple and ebony)

Top, Ribs, Back and F-holes (Pine, Maple and ebony for purfling)

Sound post, tailpiece and top-nut. (Pine and ebony)

The parts of the bow.

Point, Frog and stick

Hair and screw

The continuity, the tone, the modulation and range of the violin made it occupy an important role in Carnatic music concerts in South India, over the last 150 years and more.

Some personalities who first played violin in Carnatic music.

As can be seen from the previous descriptions, the violin, which has been considered by some to be originated from the Ravanastron, took up a different shape and design in Europe, and has been used in Carnatic music since over 200 years. The following are some of the early pioneers who have been reputed with the gradual adoption of the instrument to the level that it has become an indispensable part of the modern day Carnatic music concert.
Varahappa Iyer

He was a Minister of the Thanjavur Maratha Court was a highly placed official well-versed in English who had an in-depth knowledge of music. On his visit to the British Governor’s residence in Madras, he had the occasion to see the various western instruments in his collection. His close friendship with the Governor enabled him to try them out. Although he was initially awestruck at the range (spanning 7 octaves) of the piano, he instinctively realized that it was the Violin that was eminently adaptable to our system of music. A brief period of practice increased his familiarity with the instrument to the extent that the Governor gifted it to him. With time, he became proficient enough to provide accompaniment to vocal music. In recognition of his meritorious service, a lane in Thanjavur has been named after him. It is also noteworthy that Guruvamma, the widow of Thyagaraja’s grandson Panchapakesayya lived for some years in this street.65

Walajapet Krishnaswami Bhagavatar

(Son and disciple of Walajapet Venkatramana Bhagavathar)

Krishnaswami Bhagavatar was the son of Walajapet Venkatramana Bhagavathar. Both father and son were two of the chief disciples of Thyagaraja. Believed to be highly proficient, Krishnaswami Bhagavata is said to have had the honour of providing violin accompaniment to Thyagaraja at his Bhajana singing. On other occasions Krishnaswami Bhagavatar himself used to sing along as he played, like the Vainikas of his time. His disciples include fiddle Munuswami Appa of Bangalore, guru of Bangalore Nagarathnamma who was an ardent devotee of Thyagaraja.

Thanjavur Sivaramakrishna Iyer

No Information available on this performer, who has been mentioned in passing by some authors.

Annaswamy Sastri

(Grandson of Shyama Sastri)

This son of Subbaraya Sastri, the son of Shyama Sastri, was a worthy composer in his own right, and reputed to be a good violinist.

Fiddle Subbarayar

The above 3 personalities are also mentioned in the list of early violin pioneers, but very little information is available about them, or their contributions.

Baluswami Dikshithar

(1786 – 1859)

Baluswami Dikshithar is believed to be the pioneer who introduced violin to Carnatic Music. It is believed that it is at their instance, a visiting European violinist taught Baluswami Dikshithar to play the violin. Later on, Baluswami Dikshithar adapted his violin playing technique to suit Carnatic music. His brother Muthuswami Dikshithar composed “nottuswarams” in Sankarabharanam raga to practice with.

From 1825, he was the Asthana Vidwan of Ettayapuram. He was also the music tutor of the Raja of Ettayapuram. Baluswami Dikshithar gave a number of concerts along with his brother Chinnaswamy Dikshithar. The brothers are stated to be the first among duos of prominence known in history.

Vadivelu (1810 – 1845)

Vadivelu is one of the illustrious members of the famous Tanjore Quartet. He learnt violin under a European missionary at Tanjore. He was a musical genius and he popularised the use of violin in Carnatic Music Concerts. He was the best loved of the artistes of Swati Tirunal, and he became the Asthana Vidwan at the age of 14. A scholar in Tamil and Telugu, he was also a distinguished vocalist, violinist, composer and Bharatanatyam exponent.

His musical scholarship drew praise not only from the Kings and other patrons, but also from Saint Thyagaraja himself. It is believed that the saint entered his house and praised him – a gesture rarely extended by the saint.
Valadi Radhakrishna Iyer (1840-1908)

He was a good violinist, having accompanied stalwarts like Maha Vaidyanatha Iyer and Patnam Subrahmanya Iyer and was also a soloist. It was he who laid the foundation for violin in the Lalgudi family and this tradition has continued for the next three successive generations.

Tirukodikaval Krishna Ayyar (1857 – 1913)

After initial training from his father Kuppuswamy Ayyar, he later had further training from Kothavasal Venkatrama Ayyar and also had the benefit of advanced training from stalwarts like Sathanur Panchanada Ayyar and Fiddle Subbarayar. Krishna Ayyar’s playing style was said to be characterised with masculine grandeur and a touch of genius. He used to provide violin accompaniment to great maestros such as Maha Vaidyanatha Ayyar, Patnam Subrahmanya Ayyar and Sarabha Sastri. He was also one of the pioneers of solo violin playing. He ushered in a technique known as “izhaittu vasippu” and produced ascending and descending glides with great effect. Krishna Ayyar had a number of illustrious students – Semmangudi Narayanaswami Ayyar (the uncle and guru of Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer) and Tirukodikaval Ramaswamy Ayyar, among the notable ones.

Malaikottai Govindaswami Pillai (1879 – 1931)

Govindaswami Pillai had his initial training in vocal and violin under Umayalpuram Panchapakesa Ayyar and later under Ettayapuram Kothandapani Bhagavathar. His graceful touches, his polished play, the sweetness and purity of his notes, his superb rendering of krithis, his exquisite finish and the ease and freedom in all the three octaves and the three degrees of speed, made him a great violinist of his times. Pillai’s playing style was characterised by sheer brilliance and originality. He brought in the innovation of a full bowing technique. Like vainikas, he used to sing to the tune of his violin play. His violin play was also marked by his brilliant alapanas and kalpana swaras and he had mastered the technique of tana playing of the bow. Papa Venkataramayya was among his important disciples.
Brief description of the principles of fingering in violin play.

Violin playing (fingering) can be basically understood as the SSS formula (Stops, Slides and slurs).

1. Stops – basic ones, are used primarily for playing Shuddha and Janta swarams)
2. Slides (Jarus). Single and two finger slides are commonly used, to smoothly slide from one note to another.
3. Slurs (Kampitam). Played either by a miniature slide with one finger, or as a 2 finger combination movement.

The potential of the violin, as seen by the early pioneers.

- All shruthi values, especially those that have a simple relationship to the adhara shadjam, like pa (3/2) or sussda madhyamam (5/4) or antara gandharam (4/3) can be controlled precisely by minute finger movements, by those master artistes who listen carefully to them and compare them with the adhara shadjam. So also the vadi / samvadi leaps which characterise many a raga phrase can be produced with a single finger, given the relatively small size of the fingerboard, or approximated fast and well using 2 finger movements.
- Gamakas can be produced effectively in the violin. This is a direct consequence of the non-fretted nature of the fingerboard. The early pioneers adapted their ideas and fingerings well to the needs of a melodic quotient in a concert.
- Melodious, powerful and well-modulated tones are possible in a violin, which can reach many in the audience easily – there was no external amplification in the period before 1940, or even for a decade or two later.
- Continuity and modulation in sound can be maintained by the bow. Discrete notes too can be produced.
- The violin can relatively (vis-à-vis the Flute and the Veena) be easily tuned to any pitch. Strings can also be changed quickly. The range of notes easily playable on a violin also suited the needs of a Carnatic music concert. Hence violin slowly but surely became popular among musicians and music lovers.
The need for the violin to be held differently.

- Nature of Gamakams – Jaru and kampitam etc. need the violin to be held very firmly. Hence the performer rests the violin scroll on his heel and props it up against his chest.
- All performers sit and perform. This could also have been a reason for the necessity for this posture.
- The importance of firm and yet flexible grip. Besides holding the violin so as prevent shaking, the violin also needs to admit of bowing on various strings, and switching from high positions in fingering to lower ones, and vice-versa.
- The main types of grip, as can be seen to have evolved are:
  1. Between ankle and chest or between ankle and the collar bone (clavicle)
  2. Since this grip causes discomfort, and is thought to trigger medical conditions like spondylosis and hernia, various “scroll-rest stands” to hold the violin have also come into use of late.

The principles of bowing, and holding the bow.

- Always play perpendicular to the string.
- Distance from bridge and thickness of string. Flat of the hair and side of the hairs used.
- The variations in speed and pressure of the bow.
- Gripping the bow:
  - Role of thumb, Index finger and ring finger (or little finger)
  - Role of wrist and elbow

All the above factors need to be thoroughly understood, in order to be able to use the bow effectively. Also it is necessary to note that the fingers should strive to maintain a perpendicular position relative to the string, for producing good and steady tone.